

A GIRL'S GUIDE TO LOVE IN THE BIG CITY

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personal stories: The Mean Reds, by Holly G.

The City is not good for me. I came here to make it, make it big—and still I am small, a speck of dust in the grime that collects on the surface of things, the grime that is a by-product of the hustle and bustle of the City, the grime in the shadows, away from the city lights.

I no longer bother to peer at my face in the mirror. I know what I will see: the City's face, hard and unrelenting. It is the face I share with the laborer who bumps into me in the alley of small eateries between two gigantic malls; the salesgirl on break, slurping her soup; the tot that accosts me like a veteran bully, demanding a coin.

It is less a face than a cog in the wheel of a well-oiled machine. It was this gleaming machine that I had dreamed of, as a young girl. Up close, I now see that the City sits upon a shadowy legion, squirming underneath its unbearable weight.

1. Finding Love

“A shadowy legion squirming underneath its unbearable weight?”

That's a bit much, don't you think?

Let the City help you get over this sense of anomie, so prevalent among the young females of its working class. Let us help you, cherished Citizen, find Love.

Allow us to parse what you're saying. What you really mean is this: the City is not good for you, because you are alone—as though it is the City that keeps you from Love. We suggest you reconsider your opinion. To use a quaint rural truism, one reaps what one sows. And this is true today, even, in the urban landscape. True Citizens know this and work hard to get what they want: money, power, prestige, designer children. Why should Love be any different, for you or any other Citizen?

The truth is, you may need to double your efforts to find true Love. Perhaps you spend too much time reading about relationships, rather than making them. Worse, you may be one of those women who read romance books on the train, or while waiting in line. Worst, you may just be a workaholic. Get a life. No one desires an addict, or an ignorant consumer of pap; not many things are more detestable than an idler. The City prizes earnest sophistication above many things. Sophistication requires imagination, and imagination is a muscle that develops only through frequent use. Some are born with the innate ability to imagine and dream—but others, particularly migrants to the City, lack this capability.

2. Snagging Your Angel

Fortunately, the City is perfectly capable of creating dreamscapes for you. Consider, for example, this display window, bordered by pale bouquets of lilies. Do they not glow like pale tapers, suggesting a dress shop in romantic Paris? And consider this headless mannequin in a silken woolen coat, soft and white: does it not remind you of wings? See here, the textile itself is not so much angelic as it is—feathery. Here, run your fingers against the fabric. Do you feel its seductive intent? We knew you would.

Go on, clear your throat. Call the shopgirl. Announce your intention to try on this coat.

Sure, the coat is heavier than expected, but a bearable weight on your shoulders. Does it feel like a perfect fit? Tell the shopgirl you wish to view yourself in a mirror.

A face that isn't yours stares back at you. A cleft in the chin, a fullness of lip, a darkness in the eyes. A face suffused with the glow of the feathers. A face deserving of one's admiration. A mysterious, properly feathered, un-angelic angel.

"It's as if it were made for you," the shopgirl says softly.

Shivering with desire, you agree.

The coat will cost you more than you expect. But pay for it—that is, allow your credit card company to pay for you; you can work out the details later—pay for it, and take it home.

Congratulations. You are now a woman in love.

personal stories: The First Time, by Leda Z.

I took it out of its box and laid it carefully on the bed.

"Oh, how tiny your bed!" it exclaimed, as though charmed by its smallness. "How tiny your room!"

And I realized that I had no space to keep it—I was then renting a room that used to be my landowner's walk-in closet.

The coat cast its luminous sheen on the rest of my things, and everything else looked paltry and sad. I felt ashamed. Let it spend the night on your bed, I told myself, then take it back, cancel the transaction. Where would you wear it? I scolded myself. What were you thinking?

I laid a clean sheet at the foot of the bed, then took off my clothes.

“Hold it right there,” it said.

And I turned to it, saw it sprawled languorously on my bed. And because it bid me come, I drew closer, allowed it to pull me into an embrace. I lay on top of it—for that’s what it told me to do—gingerly, anxiously. And then suddenly it began to tickle me with its silky feathers. For the first time in a very long time, I heard myself laugh a soulful laugh, in the heart of the soulless City. And then I allowed the great wings do to me what they did.

3. Office Metamorphosis

It is amazing how quickly a wise investment can turn your life around. It makes you feel sexy, and therefore confident, and confident is sexy. No more Ms. Mousy. Hello, Queen of the City!

You take it to work, draped on your arm. The other girls stare at it, make excuses to become your friend. They cannot stop admiring the faux down. An impractical luxury, your boss says disapprovingly. But you note the envy in her eyes. You hear gossip about your impending promotion.

In spite of yourself you become wary of these jealous eyes, the fawning fingers, the random bold caress.

“I can’t help it, I’m sorry,” your friend apologizes, when you catch her attempting to put it on once, when you had left it resting on your chair. You smile back, but scheme to sabotage her upcoming presentation.

“I can’t help it,” your coat says coolly, when you tell it to dial down the sexy. “I am who I am.”

It's time you take a break from everyday life. Book a holiday for two. Let your fingers fly on the keyboard, as you key in your credit card details—for your companion has no other job but to love you. Choose your destination wisely. Such coats are not made for wet and humid climes.

4. Keeping Love Alive

A romantic getaway is a sure way to defuse tension. But remember: partners must plan romantic trips together. It does not matter that only one party is paying for the holiday (and if it does, then one must ask whether a trip together is a good idea). This rule is especially important if the relationship is quite new. A surprise trip is not likely to ignite passion, when holiday choices are made without considering a lover's preferences.

You realize your error, sitting in the veranda of a private hut, in a courtyard filled with the smell of fruits and flowers. You stare at the lotus growing out of a carp-filled pond, and ponder the coat and its sullen silence. It had remained quietly draped around your shoulder throughout the trip, saying only that it did not agree with island weather. Upon arrival at the resort, it slid dramatically into bed and has not stirred since.

Perhaps an urban escape at a World Fashion Capital might have been a better choice—oh, the opportunity to show it off at museum openings! Nights at the theater! Evening galas! After all, your escort is a handsome evening coat.

But funds are low. You couldn't possibly afford that sort of holiday, could you? Let's not forget you are still paying in installments for your dreamy companion.

A smiling, bare-shouldered girl sets before you a bowl of mangoes, tea, and an artlessly arranged vase of scarlet bougainvilleas. Her lithe servitude lets you know that you are her queen. But you feel less queenly now that your consort

refuses to play its part. You move to the bed and shake it awake. You throw it on your shoulders to feel regal again. But it hangs heavily, like a grudge.

A group of little girls sway into your courtyard unannounced, accompanied by the clanging of the gamelan. They move with the grace of temple dancers, their hair garlanded with blossoms. They see you standing on your veranda, in your coat of silken down, and abandon their dance. They run to you and stroke the feathery fabric, twittering to each other in a language like birdsong.

“You see, it’s not as bad as it seems,” you whisper to it softly, after the girls have gone.

You feel it squeeze your shoulders gently. You begin to discuss dinner plans.

But alas, your coat is not hungry.

5. quiz: Are You Headed for Splitsville?

Despite one’s best efforts, many relationships do end. It is preferable to know when one must end love, so that one can prepare for it, and undertake measures to mitigate the expected pain. To assist you in this delicate matter, we have put together a quiz to help you determine the viability of your chosen dreamscape, and the true state of your own personal Paradise:

STATEMENT	TRUE	FALSE
1. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT WHEN YOU’RE ALONE. YOU HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON EXCEPT, PERHAPS, A LOVE FOR FEATHER DOWN.		
2. YOU NO LONGER RECALL THE ONE YOU FELL IN LOVE WITH; YOUR LOVER HAS BEGUN TO RESEMBLE AN OLD MANGY DOG.		

STATEMENT	TRUE	FALSE
3. YOU FIND YOURSELF CONSTANTLY THINKING ABOUT HOW ANNOYING, HOW LAZY, AND HOW BORING YOUR LOVER IS. YOU RESENT THAT IT WON'T GET UP AND JOIN YOU FOR DINNER.		
4. YOU MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR LOVER'S MANGY STATE—HAVING DRAGGED IT TO DINNER IN THE MIDDLE OF A TROPICAL STORM.		
5. YOU HAVEN'T SPENT MUCH TIME TOGETHER. YOU HAVE BEEN ASHAMED TO TAKE IT WITH YOU ON DAY TRIPS AND TOURS. NOBODY WEARS COATS IN THE TROPICS.		
6. YOUR LOVER HAS BEEN SICK WITH FEVER, AND YOU'VE STOPPED CARING ABOUT WHAT IT FEELS, OR THINKS.		
7. YOU REGULARLY FANTASIZE ABOUT THE RESORT STAFF'S NAKED SHOULDERS, HOW ARTFULLY THEY FRAME THE GIRLS' SILK BROCADE TUBE TOPS.		

If most of your answers have been 'true,' your relationship might be past its use-by date. Have a serious conversation to get your relationship back on track, or call it quits, and move on.

personal stories: The Thing With Feathers, by Emily D.

It's been three months, since I threw it out of my closet. It took up too much space in my life. It sucked my wallet dry. It was too needy. I wasn't ready to commit to weekly dry-cleaning runs. It was too hot and heavy for my taste. It wore on my patience. I grew tired of the drama.

But now I miss it, that lovely thing with feathers.

I spend all my free time looking for another—although now that I am broke, I visit the basement boutiques, the ones that sell last season's fashion at a discount.

Once I thought I found it—the same cut, color, label—hanging by itself on a rail; but it wasn't my coat. It was nothing like my angel coat. My feathery coat. The pretender was made of frayed wool; it looked nothing like feathers. I even tried it on, would you believe? That ugly thing. The memory of that magical evening at the other boutique—the feathers and the lilies glowing under the lamplight, that angel face staring back at me with desire—it moved me to tears. I broke down in that cold ugly basement, wearing that shaggy thing that I wasn't looking for.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

The sales associate, a middle-aged woman, took the coat off and led me to a bench near the fitting rooms. There, I told her everything there was to tell about my feathery lover and me.

“Sometimes I can't even remember that face anymore. The face in the mirror; it wasn't mine.”

She took my hands and led me to a fitting room. “Look into that mirror,” she said. “Whose face do you see?”

I could not bear to look. I didn't answer.

“Listen,” she said kindly. “It should be your face that you see in the mirror.”

And so I looked into the mirror. And there, a face—a cleft in the chin, a quivering lip, heartbreak apparent in the red-rimmed eyes.

“See that? That face is yours.”

The face smiled back at me: a tiny smile.

“I'll leave you two alone. You girls catch up.”

Needless to say, we hit it off. Now we are back at the basement boutique, my face and I, thanking the lady for making the introduction.

“If it hadn’t been for you,” my face tells her, “I would never have met my soulmate.”

I nod in agreement, but secretly scan the basement for the angel coat. I still miss my coat, remember the comfort of its silken down.

“Glad it’s working out for you girls. Now let’s get back to business.”

Our friend is all business today, it seems.

“Since you have a thing for feathers—” and at these words I snap back to attention—“may I interest you in this lovely pair of shoes?”

She kneels before us and opens a shoebox. Inside is the most exquisite pair of pumps I’ve ever seen.

“Genuine peacock feather. They’ll help make you feel surefooted and confident in the office. City girls love them.”

I can tell that my face is beginning to frown.

“And they come at a good price,” the saleslady continues. “Times are hard, we know. But we all deserve a little happiness, don’t we?”

They really know what makes me happy. These City sales associates are good.

“I’ll take them!” I say, perhaps a bit too loudly.

“You might want to try them on first,” says the face. That nag.

But she’s right.

And I do.

And they fit perfectly.

“They were made for you,” the sales associate coos.

Shivering with excitement, I agree.

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